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Zachary Sng. *The Rhetoric of Error from Locke to Kleist.* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010. 216 pp. $50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8047-7017-0.

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To Err is Human

In this ambitious monograph, Zachary Sng explores how several key German and English texts from the long eighteenth century (1688-1815) responded to the threat of 'error,' and he examines their use of certain rhetorical figures as "a system of error management" (p. 5). Although such a discussion could easily degenerate into little more than a historiographical taxonomy that merely catalogues various kinds of unintentional deviance and attempted correction, Sng successfully avoids this temptation. Instead, drawing heavily upon the language(s) and worldview(s) of deconstruction, he hunts down apparently inherent paradoxes and incompatibilities latent in the work of John Locke, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, John Horne Tooke, Immanuel Kant, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Heinrich von Kleist, and others, and he argues that many of these conceptual and linguistic instabilities are inseparably associated with error. Given the intricacy and density of his arguments, it is impossible to give an adequately detailed account of the main chapters in this review, but a few of the most striking themes and preoccupations can be briskly summarized.

Chapter 1 probes Locke's "deeply conflicted" (p. 23) views concerning language, which are so fundamental to his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690). Sng is particularly provoked by Locke's claim that language's centrality to his enquiry only became clear *after* he had already begun his investigations, implying that his subsequent delvings into the philosophy of language (esp. Book 3 of Locke's *Essay*) were intended to drag his treatise back to the correct path, to prevent it from deviating or erring. As Sng convincingly demonstrates, in the system Locke propounds, language operates both as a conduit and as a barrier, and epistemology must be protected from its imperfections. Many of the complexities that bedevil these topics arise from the metaphors and analogies used to describe the workings of language in the *Essay* (e.g., allusions to conduits, pipes, fountains), but the greatest irony is that the very title page, with its quotations from Ecclesiastes and Cicero, insinuates that language is unreliable *from its very origin*–that is, the source itself is corrupt, primarily due to problems of naming. The implications latent in these quotations are at odds with some of Locke's ensuing assertions, and, to this extent, Sng suggests that the *Essay* is self-thwarting. He goes on to offer a thought-provoking assessment of Locke's metaphorical references to gold, and the genuineness and inherent value of this precious metal are contrasted with its price and value as money. This recognition makes possible a potentially fruitful consideration of Locke's economic and linguistic theories: the social functions of language and money are both determined by the principle of common consent and the arbitrary assignation of value.

If chapter 1 presents an intricate and persuasive assessment of Locke's philosophy of language, chapter 2 is rather more of a mixed bag. Initially the contrasting approaches to etymological analysis propounded in Leibniz's *New Essays on Human Understanding* (wrt. 1704) and John Horne Tooke's *Epea Pteroenta, or The Diversions of Purley* (part 1,1786; part 2, 1805) are compared. Leibniz's method of disambiguation and clarification relied upon particular rhetorical figures which enable lexical meanings to be traced back to their origin, thus shifting the burden of guarantee away from a stable source and towards the unreliable intermediary region of the trope. By contrast, Tooke emphasized the prevalence of abbreviation, a phenomenon which could induce an undesirable loss of clarity, and sometimes even corruption when it resulted in unintentional conflation. Sng is particularly keen to reveal the affinities that exist between Samuel Taylor Coleridge's and Tooke's linguistic theorizing, and the chapter culminates with a close reading of "Frost at Midnight" (wrt. 1798). Sng identifies "recurrent figures of mirroring" (p. 69) in the text, but the arguments he ad-

duces in order to substantiate this suggestion are largely unconvincing. For instance, the claim that lines such as

So gaz'd I, till the soothing things, I dreamt

Lull'd me to sleep, and sleep prolonged my dreams!

convey something of "memory's awesome power" by inverting the phoneme sequences "*d-l-s*" (that is, /d/, /l/, and /s/) and "*s-th*" (pp. 69-70) is ultimately risible. The latter example is particularly clumsy and (ironically) erroneous: the initial and medial consonants in "soothing" are /s/ and /ð/, while the initial and final consonants in "things" are /θ/ and /z/. Consequently, a more accurate elementary phonemic analysis reveals that, due to the distinction of voicing, the alleged inversion is a chimera, and Sng's claims are undermined by his own confusion concerning the correspondence (or lack thereof) between graphemes and phonemes in English. By means of such manufactured analyses, Sng forcibly squeezes and remolds Coleridge's poor poem, ensuring that it conforms to the strict pattern demarcated by a predetermined interpretative framework. In general, he is on much safer and securer ground (for him, at least) in chapter 3 when he explores the error of subreption (i.e., the illicit substituting of concepts and principles of experience for those of pure reason), and the connections between gift-giving and analogy in Kant's philosophy.

Chapters 4 and 5 both focus on significant works of literature in the German tradition. First, Sng considers Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* (1795-96) in the context of virtue ethics, tracing the notion of virtue as moderation back to Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, and, via Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiment* (1759), viewing Goethe's novel as a re-engagement with the concept of the virtuous middle. One way of understanding *Bildung* ("shaping" or "formation") is as a process during which error cancels itself out in a procedural fashion. In other words, error is eradicated through erring and so eventually heals itself. Crucially, though, in Sng's account, fashion (*Mode*) renders insecure the relationship between the particular and the general, thereby destabilizing the potentially error-correcting mechanism of *Bildung*. In particular, he argues that Wilhelm's false enthusiasm is an impediment to his self-cultivation, and that the resulting confusion engenders "a madness of the middle" (p. 135) which perplexes judgement, virtue, and cognition. Since the role of "statistical frequency" (p. 114) and "statistical distribution" (p. 116) is mentioned several times in the context of aesthetic assessment and the troublesome "middle," it is unfortunate there is no attempt to explore contemporaneous thinking about probability and statistics which ultimately culminated in Carl Friedrich Gauss's definition of the normal distribution in 1809. A consideration of these important topics in the intellectual history of the Enlightenment is an essential part of a truly comprehensive attempt to understand the anxieties concerning medians, modes, and middles in the long eighteenth century.

Appropriately enough, Heinrich von Kleist's play *Penthesilea* (1808) provides the main focus for chapter 4, and the difficulty of the middle returns once again, this time as part of Kleist's account of the encounter between the Greeks and the Amazons at Troy. Specifically, in Sng's interpretation, the triadic structure of the beginning, the middle, and the end is foregrounded, and this inevitably brings into prominence the prevalence of error and its role in the determination of meaning. By examining both Kleist's play and its Herodotean source material, he scrutinizes the kinds of errors that ensue when language is imperfectly mastered. Acts of misspeaking, or solecisms, provide a constant threat of corruption: if language deviates from its origin, then reconciliation can become difficult, if not impossible. For Sng, Penthesilea personally embodies these problems. She is quintessentially the third element in a triadic structure, comparable to the rhetorical figure of *zeugma*. However, she not only repeatedly fails to unify two entities (like a ineffectual yoke that does not succeed in unifying two oxen), but she suspends, by means of her mere presence, conventional systems of binary opposition. Since she has no mother, she herself lacks a precisely determined origin, and this destabilizes the closure and resolution of the entire play. For Sng, this accounts for the striking irresolutions that characterize *Penthesilea*. As he puts it, the play's trajectory is "one of increasing disorder and an accumulation of remainders and remnants" (p. 155).

On the whole, this is a frustrating book. Sng's arguments are sometimes labored and contrived, his highly metaphorical expositions are occasionally irretrievably opaque, his prose is frequently tiresomely self-regarding (e.g., "perhaps the origin of the problem … is the problem of the origin" (p. 155)), and his unashamedly Derridean tendencies are, in the current academic climate, jarringly outmoded. Nonetheless, despite these flaws, the enquiry that he undertakes is characterized by a consistent seriousness of ambition and an impressive intellectual breadth. Therefore, although it must be perused with a considerable degree of patience, his robust probing of the intriguing interconnections between error and rhetoric in the long eighteenth century certainly repays careful reading.

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